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Slim Pickings

Our Linguistic Buildup Is Slow

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ARE THERE any Americans who speak Cambodian, read Swahili, write Pashto? A job of language detection for the Nation is being done by the Center for Applied Linguistics here, an arm of the Modern Language Association of America.

It has just finished the first phase of an effort to locate everyone in the 50 states able to handle an exotic tongue important to the national interest. In the past two years it has recorded answers to 1875 questionnaires in its Roster of Linguists.

Nearly 500 languages are represented, ranging from Danish to such offbeat tongues as Maori of New Zealand. The respondents range from university professors and missionaries to safari leaders and housewives.

THE STATISTICS, however, do not make pleasant reading. A mere ten persons claimed a knowledge of Albanian, the tongue of China's chief satellite in its rift with Soviet Russia. The Far Eastern tongues were reported by a depressingly small number. Only six Americans indicated familiarity with Tibetan; an equal number with Vietnamese; five with Cambodian, and four with Laotian.

Chinese, spoken in various forms by some 600 million people, was claimed by 352 individuals, of whom only 47 indicated advanced or native mastery. Arabic, key idiom of the Middle East, was reported by 144, only one third of them possessing high fluency.

The pickings were slimmest of all for sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 800 distinct languages are used. A total of 39 Americans were located who had some acquaintance with many idioms of that continent, although only five of them were fluent.

WHILE THESE figures are in many cases not comprehensive, they do reflect how discouragingly slow has been the Nation's effort to build up its linguistic firepower.

After World War II, it seemed that language study was getting a new lease on life. And Sputnik I in 1957 triggered passage of the National Defense Education Act, which allocated millions for stepping up the teaching of science, mathematics and foreign tongues.

Just what is it that makes Americans so allergic to other tongues? One major cause is this Nation's peculiar sociological development as a vast pioneer monolingual land where the Melting Pot concept prevailed. Geography played a role, too, and there are few lands where one can travel 4000 miles — roughly the distance between Portland, Maine, and Portland, Oregon — without switching tongues.

World War I brought a wave of hysteria against the German language and, by extension, against everything foreign. Sauerkraut was renamed "Liberty cabbage," while some 20 states passed legislation banning any foreign idiom as a medium of instruction.

Then came World War II, which saw 11 million tongue-tied Americans deployed over global battlefronts as they paid in "snafus," misunderstandings and even blood for the shortsightedness of those who had planned their education.

FROM ALL indications, however, even today we have not yet learned our language lesson thoroughly enough. Many still feel that Yankee ingenuity and occasional use of an interpreter can get us by anywhere. The State Department, nevertheless, scarcely shares this view. Each year its Foreign Service officers devote about 800,000 man-hours to the study of language spoken in the countries for which they are bound.

The dangers of working through the native English-speaking elite or interpreters have been made painfully obvious to us in recent years as we have shouldered the global tasks of a leader of the free world.

Out of a sense of deference to their employers, they chose only items favorable to us. When we were at last able to train and dispatch our own linguist to that country who could read the newspapers and attend sessions of the legislature, he found that it was in the grip of a virulent wave of anti-Americanism.

ALL SIGNS point to an end to striped-pants diplomacy and the beginning of an era of communication with the peoples of the world at the very grass roots. And while English is indeed the most used second language the world over, it cannot answer all the needs that 20th century "overseasmanship" imposes upon us. In India, even after centuries of British rule, only about 5 per cent of the people can speak English.

The language gap can be closed only if we rid ourselves of some harmful misconceptions. Above all, it is imperative to reject the notion that somehow language knowledge can be secured at a bargain counter and in a hurry. Few human activities are so complex as the act of speech, involving subtle physiological, psychological and socialogical factors.

Remarkable progress indeed been made here and there in the country. Much of it has occurred right here in Washington, where well over 50 tongues are offered by such excellent teaching centers as Georgetown University's Institute of Languages and Linguistics, George Washington University, American University and the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies.

Howard University claims not only several first-class language departments but also one of the few African Language and Area Centers in the country, providing instruction in Swahili, Yoruba and Tswana.

Some Government agencies have set up their own linguistic facilities. These include the Naval Intelligence Language School and the State Department's Foreign Service Institute, which has given instruction in more than 40 tongues.

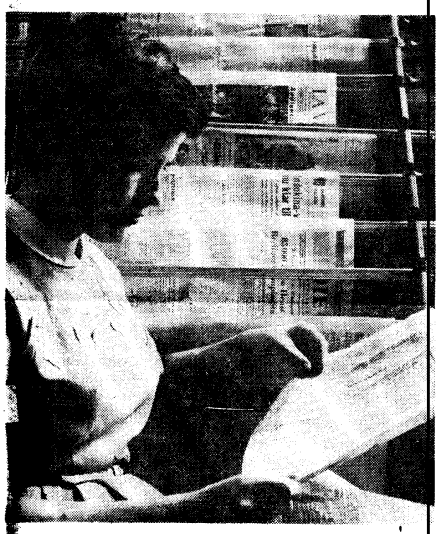
A number of private and public schools offer excellent language instruction; St. Alban's Preparatory School was one of the first secondary schools in the land to offer Russian some 10 years ago.

NEVERTHELESS, despite some bright spots, the language picture is very unsatisfactory. We are the only advanced nation in the world where barely 20 per cent of the public secondary school population is studying a modern tongue and where it is possible to graduate from college without a single credit in this subject.

Notoriously gimmick-minded, our citizens grasp eagerly at any innovation that might take the blood, sweat and tears out of the business of learning a second tongue. First it was phonograph discs, then magnetic tape recorders, then dormiphones (learn languages while you sleep!), and now it is the teaching machine, which is being ballyhooed as the ultimate solution. While most of these are excellent aids, they cannot in themselves provide shortcuts to mastery.

The crux of the problem lies in making foreign language an integral part of the curriculum rather than the orphan discipline it still is to a large extent. A blueprint for the sort of language training we need would have the basic aim of making every high school graduate bilingual.

Elementary school pupils would begin one of ten major world tongues by grade three and continue for a sequence of at least six years. Upon graduation from high school, all except the retarded minority would have a basic reading, writing and speaking control of a second tongue. College would permit specialization and advanced work in area subjects, literature, linguistics and the study of further tongues, particularly Asian and African ones.



A Georgetown University student reads newspapers direct from foreign capitals to learn what the rest of the world is saying about the United States—in its various tongues. The school offers instruction in 30 languages.

Prof. Helen Yakobson, head of Georgetown University's Slavic department, instructs a group of students in advanced Russian conversation and composition.